

Orleans inside. So Ellis went, like a fly to honey. But the girls were transvestites. He figured it out after he arm wrestled his waitress for his drink and lost, lost bad, getting thrown off his barstool. So he grabbed his drink and left, meeting up with Ruth outside the door.

"What were you doing in there?" she asked.

"He told her, 'Nothin'. They're all guys.'"

The barker saw Ruth's crew cut and evening gown and offered her a job. She decked him and stepped inside, where she purchased a wig (loose blonde ringlets) right off the head of the bartender, Camille (Carl). When she pushed through the curtains back onto Bourbon Street, Ellis wolf-whistled and yelled, "OOEE! HEY BABY!" Then he realized it was Ruth and he shut up.

#### RUTH'S MOM'S HEAD

Ruth and Ellis had been counting on a little inheritance when Ruth's mom died. The old lady wasn't rich, but she had life insurance and a little two-bedroom 1950-built stucco house two blocks east of the old Coast Route, paid for free and clear. But when Mom got the cancer, she made other plans for her money, and made them legally, changing her will to switch beneficiaries: her daughter and lowlife son-in-law would get nothing, and the Loma Alta Life Extension Foundation would get everything else.

The Foundation would, for an initial thirty-five thousand dollars, remove Mom's head from her dead but still fresh body and cryogenically suspend (freeze) it. The remainder of the money from her estate would pay for the year-to-year upkeep and rent on her shiny metal, super-cold neurocan, where she would wait indefinitely for modern medicine to — whenever it was ready — supply her with a new young body: preferably one, as dictated by her will, that would make men twist their heads and howl, "HUBBA HUBBA!" Of course, these future wolves would suck those hubba hubbas right back in when they caught sight of the gargoyle head riding atop that voluptuous twenty-first century sexpot, but Mom, crazy from the chemo, hadn't thought about that.

The weather was miserable the day of Mom's funeral, with a stinging cold wind pushing black clouds in off the ocean. Icy, scattered raindrops the size of marbles bombarded the mourners, exploding on the priest's bald head and the plain pine coffin and the folding metal chairs. When the eulogy was over and the box with Mom's headless body was being lowered into its hole, Ruth raised her head and wailed, "MOMMA, MOMMA, MOMMA!" As the men pulled her away, the



clouds let loose with a vengeance and sent the crowd running, drenched and chilled to the bone by the time they bounced into their cars.

At Ruth and Ellis' house after the ceremony, over cold cuts and potato salad, Ruth, using her next door neighbor and best friend Juanita as a sounding board, hatched a plan. It was this: they, Ruth and Juanita, would break into the Loma Alta Life Extension Foundation's warehouse and liberate Mom's head; the old lady hadn't been in her right mind at the end, everyone knew that. And they'd see to it that she (Mom's head) would get a proper burial. Then, after a couple of weeks, Ruth would go to visit Mom (the Foundation encouraged it), find out they had lost her, and lay claim to the remainder of the estate. Juanita was initially hesitant, toying with the black olives on her paper plate and saying, "I don't know, Ruth, it sort of gives me the creeps." But when Ruth mentioned ten percent, Juanita haggled her up to fifteen, flung her plate, frisbee-like, at the trash can, and said, "So when do we pull it off?"

The two ladies, clad in black jogging suits and watch caps, did a wee hours creep through the Foundation's warehouse and located the shelves of neurocans — padded and insulated one-head vats where the 'patients' soaked in their individual baths of liquid nitrogen, waiting for the day they'd be reawakened. Ruth played her flashlight beam along the shelves until she located the label 'IRENE PORTINI.' "There she is," said Ruth, giving Juanita an elbow as a fat tear rolled down her cheek. "How come they're not in glass jars?" said Juanita. "I thought we'd get to see her." "They can't get glass cold enough, Juanita," Ruth replied. "Don't you know nothin' about modern technology?" But Juanita did get her chance to see Mom, because Ruth didn't want to take the whole neurocan: an empty spot on the shelf would tip the Foundation folks off that one of their patients was missing and give them a chance to cover their tracks. Much better, Ruth said, to roll her out and carry her home in Ellis' bowling ball bag.

Ruth tried to be gentle, rolling Mom's head out into her partner-in-crime's waiting hands, but the liquid nitrogen burned Juanita and made her pull back, and Mom rolled out of the neurocan and hopped away across the concrete floor like a bouncing cue ball, trailing a tail of white smoke, ringing out loud and hollow with each impact on the cement. Ruth and Juanita chased her down, caught her, and — of necessity — played hot potato on their way back to the bowling bag, tossing the head back and forth between them, shaking their momentarily free, cold-burned hands, recatching, cursing, juggling and tossing, before Juanita finally slam-dunked her into the waiting ball bag then



pulled her blistering hands back to rub them on the soft warmth of her sweat shirt.

The ladies didn't arrive home until the pink dawn was brightening the eastern sky. They went their separate ways for some much needed sleep, with Juanita promising to give Ruth a call when she woke up. "We'll get together and figure out what to do with her," she said, pointing at the bag in Ruth's hand. Ruth said O.K., that they'd come up with a game plan over coffee and carry it out later in the afternoon. They'd forgotten about their husbands' Saturday morning bowling league.

Ellis stuck his hand in the bag (thumb in the mouth, middle fingers jammed into the eyes) pulled her out and fired without looking. "She's rollin' a little funny," Clete observed from his seat on the fiberglass bench where he was pulling on his rental shoes. "Yeah," said Ellis, watching her bounce and skip down the alley. But she hit the pocket for a strike, and Ellis shot his fist in the air and said, "Yeah!" his concern vanishing with the thunderclap of the scattering pins.

But his concern returned when Mom did: she rolled up the ball return sporting a ghastly grin that scared Clete into a dead faint and sat Ellis down on the cold floor clutching at his chest.

#### RUTH AND ELLIS CELEBRATE THE HOLIDAYS

"Take the damned camera away from the kid, would ya? Film's four-fifty a roll," Ellis shouted to his wife Ruth. "For cryin' out loud, I was savin' that roll for Xmas pictures to send out with the X-Mas cards."

Little Roy had — arm over his head for a blind grope on top of the dining room table — found the camera and clicked away: snapshots of his feet, the bottom half of the lamp, the picnic table, the toolshed....

Ruth said, "You'll just have to buy another roll; he shot the whole thing up," as she opened the camera and removed the film.

Ellis had it developed, two prints each, and he mailed them with the cards, labelled on the backs, just in case the recipients couldn't tell what they were.

And when Ruth found out — in that week between Xmas and New Years — there was hell to pay.